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MODERN LANGUAGE NOTES

VOL. XXV.

BALTIMORE, NOVEMBER, 1910.

No. 7.

MILTON'S CORRECTIONS TO THE MINOR POEMS.

Mr. Masson, in his "General Introduction to the Minor Poems," speaks of "Milton's habits of composition, and the critical fastidiousness with which, in each revision of his poems, he sought improvements in words or in sound." Again he says, "Milton erased and changed so much in the act of writing that it is impossible to give an adequate idea of his habits in this respect except by actual reproduction of the Cambridge MS. in facsimile." In 1899 this much desired reproduction was made, at the request of the Council of Trinity College and under the excellent supervision of Mr. William Aldis Wright. The pages of this facsimile are of greatest value because they reveal to us something of Milton's workshop, something of the struggles he had in moulding this often stubborn English language to the expression of his thought and the needs of his verse.

Is it true that he was fastidious and that he changed much? If so, what was he seeking by these changes; clearness of thought, beauty of expression, or the flowing music of his verse? What were his habits of correction; was the idea as he first conceived it almost perfect, needing only the change of a word here and there; or was the conception as it first came to him merely in the rough, demanding one or more rewritings before it satisfied his taste? Mr. Bradley says, "Verse may be easy and unpremeditated, as Milton says his was,¹ and yet many a word in it may be changed many a time, and the last change be more 'inspired' than the original."² Does the MS. lead us to believe that the early verse was unpremeditated as well as the later, of which Milton makes this assertion; or did he rely much on these third and fourth inspirations?

Lamb regretted greatly the evil hour in which

he had been shown these pages at Cambridge: "How it staggered me to see the fine things in their ore! interlined, corrected! as if their words were mortal, alterable, displaceable at pleasure! as if they might have been otherwise, and just as good! as if inspiration were made up of parts, and these fluctuating, successive, indifferent! I will never go into the workshop of any great artist again."³ However many persons there may be who still hold Lamb's point of view, the student of English finds his joy in the poetry no way diminished and his interest in the poet greatly increased by attempting, through a study of these manuscript lines, the most of them in Milton's own handwriting, to learn at least a little of how the poet worked in fashioning his poetic conceptions.

A superficial examination of these sheets shows one thing clearly, that Milton was extremely careful of his manuscript. The margins and lines are almost always straight and the words clearly written; wherever the pen has been drawn through, it has been done in clean fashion, not to mar letters above or below the cancelled words. New phrases, and often words, are written plainly in the margin, frequently with a star at the new and old to indicate that one fits into the place of the other. Occasionally a pen mark connects the fresh material with that which has been stricken out, in order to leave no question about its position. An erased word, on second thought to be retained, is in almost all instances sharply underscored. Milton, it is true, sometimes rather overdoes this nice exactness, as when he closes *Comus* with: *Exit, the end, Finis*. The writing of these poems was done at many and various times from 1631 to at least 1645, yet the pages which Milton himself wrote differ little in form or in scrupulous care.

Another impression we gain from a glance at these written sheets is that there is a good deal of revision; there are but two pages wholly free from

¹ *Paradise Lost*, ix, 24.

² A. C. Bradley: *Shakespearean Tragedy*, p. 68.

³ See the note to Lamb's essay "Oxford in the Vacation," quoted in part by Wright in his Introduction to the *Facsimile*.

any erasures or insertions and these two contain only one sonnet each. There are thirty-nine folio pages filled, or partly filled, with poetry, and of these fully four have been altogether crossed out and rewritten, or entirely discarded. It is true that many of the lines in these sections through which he has drawn his condemning pen, are incorporated in the newly composed parts, yet they are in a new order or setting, and bring to the ear and mind a different thought. There is again no very large number of consecutive uncorrected lines. Sonnet II¹, that on his twenty-third birthday, is free from any changes, but that was doubtless a copy of the first draft, which may have been repeatedly altered. The little poem *On Time* and Sonnets VIII and XXIII stand just as first written; the verses *Upon the Circumcision*,—excluding the marginal rewriting of the last two lines—and Sonnets XV and XXI have corrections only in spelling. However, these Sonnets, except II, are all in the hand of an amanuensis, and where another used the pen the revisions are proportionally fewer; probably because the poet elaborated the theme more carefully before repeating it to another, than when he could himself make experiments on paper. With these few exceptions, every page shows the labor Milton spent in making the language express exactly the shade of meaning he had in mind.

Although a cursory glance at the pages seems to tell that the poet has altered much, yet when we come to examine them in detail, we find that of the 1813 lines fully three-fourths are without any corrections at all; and, moreover, to this total of first-hand lines, he has added as afterthought only 53. He has discarded entirely but 56, and has rewritten of whole lines barely 162. The erasures and substitutions are so scattered throughout the pages and are so much more apparent to the eye than the untouched lines, that the judgment at a glance is easily accounted for. So large a number of lines retained just as set down on paper indicates, I think, not that he changed much but that he altered relatively little. However, I have not compared his facility with that of other poets, and such a comparison might reverse this conclusion.

Milton has made the greatest number of changes

in phrases, in combinations of two or more words; sometimes he substitutes one word for two or *vice versa*, or he alters the tense of a verb, or varies the construction: for example, he changes *beetle brows* to *complexions*; *whose sway* to *beside the sway*; *it finds* to *is found*; *hid in* to *or with*.

Next in number are the changes in individual words; and among these he has had about equal difficulty with the noun and adjective. The right verb came to his demand much more frequently, as is shown by the fact that he has substituted other verbs in only about half as many instances as he has been compelled to seek name words or words of description. There are two of these corrected verbs which strike responsive chords of sympathy from all those who would write and speak English with accuracy. In *Comus* 427 he sets down first *shall* and then substitutes *will*. In the last two lines of *Circumcision* the same thing occurs; for some reason he has written these lines a second time in the margin, and it is in this second marginal writing that we find first *shall* and then *will*. He evidently was not unconscious in his precise use of these two difficult words. Those perplexing small words in our language which cost most of us so much blue pencilling, gave Milton singularly little trouble; he changes separate pronouns only nine times, prepositions eight, conjunctions ten, the article two, and the adverb five times.

Milton seldom slipped into the mechanical fault of writing a word twice, of repeating words, but his absent-mindedness is sometimes clearly in evidence. He writes, *Comus* 288, *No less then then if I should my brothers lose*, and 483, *Either either some one*. There is, however, usually a better reason for any repetitions which occur. Sometimes he writes down the word and then his ear tells him that it belongs in the next line, so he repeats it in its proper position, as *of*, *Arcades* 89; or he carries the word over from the end of one line to the beginning of the next, as *heare*, *Arcades* 72. Again he thinks to change a word and erases it; then decides to retain the same word and rewrites it, as *eye*, *Comus* 329. Twice the repetition is plainly due to the fact that in the middle of the line he determines on a different order of words: *Arcades* 57, *awakes the leaves shumbering leaves*. But most frequently the word is rewritten because the first

¹The numbering of Sonnets is that of the Globe Edition of Milton's Poems.

spelling is not correct, yet there are hardly more than a dozen of such instances.

Milton's purpose in revising his poems, if intention may be judged by result, was to render the thought clear, logical, and vivid. I believe three-fourths of the corrections attain this end. He revised less to make a well-sounding line, a more picturesque or imaginative verse, than a verse which expressed a coherent and convincing thought. In doing this there appear to have been certain habits which he recognized as a part of his style and which he sought to correct. For example, in recasting he frequently substitutes a less technical word or phrase, as if he himself saw the possible danger to his poetry from his learning. In *Solemn Music* 2, *Mixe your choise chords* is changed to *wed your divine sounds*, and in a line later entirely omitted, *chromatike jarres* is erased for *ill sounding*; *Comus* 21, *the rule and tittle* becomes *imperial rule*; in 310 *steerage of—guess of*; in 134 *polisht—cloudie*; in 242 *hold a counterpoint—give resounding grace*. Again he seeks a simpler expression, one savoring less of bombast; which trick of style he loved in his extreme youth, as is clearly revealed in the translation of the Psalms, and which he doubtless fell into from much reading of the Elizabethans. In *Comus* the Lady rapturously exclaims—following line 215—*while I see yee this dusky hollow is a paradise and heaven gates ore my head*. The poet has certainly felt the incongruity of such sentiments, and finally allows her to say only, *I see yee visibly*. At line 696, as first written, she addresses *Comus*: *O my simplicity what sights are these? what dark disguises and soothing lies. hence with thy treacherous kindnesse thou man of lies and falsehood, if thou give it me I throw it on the ground*. The Brothers are on occasion bombastic enough, but the case against them would be worse if the following lines had been allowed to remain—after line 357—*so fares as did forsaken Proserpine when the big wallowing flakes of pitchie clouds and darkness wound her in*. Again the Elder Brother first closed his speech at line 383 with this mouth-filling phrase: *walks in black vapours, though the noontyde brand blaze in the summer solstice*.

Usually, however, it is reasonably clear that Milton is revising for the direct purpose of rendering the thought more logical or more vivid. In *Arcades* 8–12, *Fame* was, in the first draft, the

subject of all the lines; the change to *we* gives a clearer sense of the relation of the two parties in the contention. *Solemn Music* 10 has first *tripled*, but the substituted *burning* unifies the line by carrying out the idea of *bright*. In 14 *blooming palms* is changed to *victorious palms*, thus giving a thought in accord with the context. In *Comus* 193 *youthly* come less fittingly from the mouth of the young girl than *wandering*. That fine line, 208, stands as first written down, *and airy tongues that lure night wanderers*; where of course the whole harmony of the passage is lost by intruding a definite statement amid the delicate suggestiveness of the lines immediately preceding and following. In *Comus* 349 the words are *sad*, then *lone*, and finally *close*; neither one of the first two seems to come logically from the lips of young men in the act of finding a person to whom the wood might reasonably appear *sad* or *lone*. In 355 we read, *she leans her thoughtful head musing at our unkindnesse*, which gives exactly the opposite impression of the line as revised. *Comus* 713 has first *cramming* instead of *thronging*, and this impossible thought is followed by the still more impossible idea, expressed in a fortunately erased line, *the fields with cattle and the aire with fowle*. Where whole verses are rewritten in the margin, this rewriting is again almost always to render the thought clearer. *Comus* 175 is added to offer a reason for 176; 254 and 255 give concreteness and vividness to a picture that would otherwise lack a definite cause and position; line 456 is inserted to present the negative action of the angels, which prepares for the positive action in the verses that follow. So the list might be greatly increased, and in each the evident search on the part of the poet was for a strong, unified thought.

It is perhaps a surprise to find how rarely Milton has to work solely for poetic suggestiveness; how seldom he feels it necessary to substitute for words thin in imaginative content those rich in suggestion. This is, however, sometimes plainly his intention, as in *Comus* 117 where he replaces *yellow* with *tawny*; or in 181 where *blind alleys of this arched wood* becomes *blind mazes of this tangled wood*; or 498 where *leapt ore the penne* is changed to *slipt from the fold*. In *Comus* 821 the plain prose of *there is another way* is slightly improved into *some other meanes I have*. The sub-

stitution of *pearled* for *white* in 834 alters the whole character of the picture, making it far more appealing to the imagination. The added line, 442, *faire silver-shafted Queen for ever chaste* has no other purpose than that of imaginative suggestion.

In less than one fourth of the instances of correction the poet's desire for a smoother line, a verse more pleasing to the ear, appears to have dictated the choice of words or phrases. One has only to take a present-day text and read the following lines, making the indicated substitutions, to be sure that this was his purpose. *Arcades* 13 read *her hide* for *conceal*; 18 *seated* for *sitting*; 50 *leaves* for *boughs*; *Comus* 58 *nam'd him Comus* for *him Comus named*; 576 *solitarie sweet retire* for *sweet retired solitude*. This purpose is perhaps more clearly seen in certain whole lines. He writes, *Solemn Music* 11, *high lifted loud archangel trumpets blow*, and gains, not thought but sound, by rewriting *their loud uplifted angel trumpets blow*. Again the weak line at 20, *drown'd natures chime and with tumultuous din*, becomes the very strong onomatopoeic verse, *jarred against natures chime and with harsh din*. In a few cases, as *Comus* 376, the chief reason for the change is, as seems, to avoid too much alliteration.

In a small number of lines he has revised for the sake of meter only, but the smallness of the number shows how true was Milton's ear, how attuned to the needs of his verse. In *Comus* 257 *would weepe* is changed to *wept* evidently to get rid of an extra syllable; in 73 *before* is blotted after *as*, and in 304 *out* after *then* for the same reason.

The question of Milton's dependence on third or fourth or later inspirations is interesting, because the number of cases in which he has sought again and again for the right word or phrase is only about forty, and because in several of these instances he has finally returned to the word with which he began. For example the rewritings stand, *Solemn Music* 20, *ever-endlesses light, ever-glorious, uneclipsed, where day dwells without night, in endlesse morn of light, in cloudlesse birth of light, in never parting light*. In the final recast he chooses the fifth form, which combines the two ideas he is seeking, duration and brightness. In *Comus* 448 he searches for an adjective to be applied to *Minerva*: *eternal, unvanquisht, unconquer'd*. Line

545 shows his difficulty in determining just how the honeysuckle shall best be characterized: *suckling, blowing, flaunting, blowing, flaunting*. In 962 he has much ado to make the words fit: *of speedier toeing, of nimbler toeing, of lighter toeing*, and finally in *of lighter toes* he wins the right concrete phrase. In 556, *soft, still, soft, sweet, soft*, he returns to *soft*, probably thinking it was the best he could do. He was not, then, as a recent writer has well-nigh made him, one of the Nine, but he had sometimes to struggle with words as lesser men have had to do.

What are the poems, if we may judge by the amount of revision shown in the manuscript, which caused him most labor? *Arcades* was written with much ease, at least with few corrections. *At a Solemn Music* was the result of hours of work and many rewritings; it is entirely rewritten three times, the last ten lines four times, and the first two versions have many changes. *Comus* shows, I believe, more uniform care for the right choice of words than any other poem. After the first four lines he wisely blots fifteen lines, mostly about gardens, roses, and dragons in the land where the Spirit has lived. They are diffuse and mar the quiet strength of the opening verses. The weak line at 133 he has sought to remodel, but has not much improved it: *and makes a blot of nature and throws a blot*, then in the margin the line as it is now in the text. *Comus* 350-358 has been much rewritten; even as it is at present, Milton was dissatisfied with it and pasted on the margin of the next sheet a new form, but this attached slip has unfortunately been lost. Lines 672-705, also the Lady's speech at 663, originally stood after 755; they have been crossed, and rewritten on a separate slip with the note that they are to be inserted after *in prinrose season*. Lines 807-810 as first written were: *come y'are too morall this is meere morall stuffe the very lees and settlings of a melancholy blood*. In this passage the change seems to me for the worse, certainly more technical. As is sometimes the case, he would better have kept his first inspiration. He has added lines 869-874, which we could ill spare from this beautiful invocation. The last song of the Spirit has been wholly rewritten, three lines being crossed and fifteen added; those added include the verses relating to Spring and the Graces, the completion

of the picture of Adonis, and the story of Cupid. Each of these passages fills up and rounds out the picture which it closes; the song read without them fails to give us as a whole the feeling of sumptuousness it was certainly intended to give.

Lycidas came to Milton's imagination, or at least to paper, in a very perfect form. He writes the first fourteen lines, and then tries the flower passage, which was evidently haunting his thought. He sets it down once; crosses it all out and begins over again. Line 146 was nearer inspiration as first written, *the muske rose and the garish columbine*, but perhaps it did not express his feeling for the flower, or it did not sound appropriate to have so gaudy a flower about the dead. Ruskin calls 148 "mixed fancy and imagination"; the first version, *every bud that sorrows liverie weares*, is also mixed but perhaps less objectionable than the form we are familiar with. After the flower passage is to his mind, he takes a fresh sheet and, commencing the poem once more, writes to the end with very little recasting, except at 58-62, which he thrice revises. Save for these two difficult parts, Milton seems to have written *Lycidas* with little premeditation and hence with ease.

The Sonnets, fifteen in number, including *On the Forcers of Conscience*—the only ones not in this manuscript are I, XVIII, XIX, XX—are fairly free from corrections, except in the case of single words, and these not numerous. Three only have been revised to any extent. The thirteenth, to Lawes, Milton seems to have been so particular about, so careful to have of the right shade of dignity that he has refined away much of the vividness of phrase; there is a strength and sureness in the first draft that the second lacks. For example, line 4, *misjoining* is better than *committing*; line 6, *and gives thee praise above the pipe of Pan*, is easier grasped by the imagination than the line as we have it about *Envy*. Again lines 12 and 13 are swifter as first written: *by the Tuscan's leav, shall set thee higher then old Casella whom Dante woo'd to sing*. He appears to have had a like thought about Sonnet XIV, to Mrs. Thomson; it must be stately, large-sounding, and the rewriting has had the similar result of making the Sonnet less vigorous. The revision of Sonnet XI is not so great in the number of changes made, but it has almost as marked an effect upon the whole; here

with quite a different subject and doubtless for a very different reason, he has really accomplished much the same thing as in working over the other two—taken some of the strength and life out of it. It began *I writ a book*, and lines 3 and 4 read *it went off well about the town a while, numbering good wits; but now is seldom poured on*. The change to the third person and passive voice which he made in revising, has not improved it.

It is true, indeed, that in a few cases Milton's second idea is less poetic than the first, but in most instances the later thought is by far the more inspired, and the work of revision has been wisely expended. The manuscript shows, moreover, that although he was a poet who generally worked with a good deal of ease and changed comparatively little, yet he was also an untiring critic of his own poems; and that many words and phrases, as well as occasional long passages, cost him much labor in bringing the thought to the fulfilment of expression.

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CHANGES IN ENGLISH USAGE BETWEEN 1878 AND 1902 AS SHOWN IN THE TEXTBOOKS OF AN AMERICAN PURIST.

That language is subject to perpetual change has long been accepted as a truism by philologists; and even conservative purists admit theoretically that the business of the lexicographer and of the grammarian is merely to record in a convenient form usages accepted by recent writers or speakers of national reputation and that the critic's conclusion is merely an expression of personal opinion which is frequently overruled. Thus does our representative American purist, Professor Adams Sherman Hill, set forth in 1878, in his *Principles of Rhetoric*, the varying standards of English usage; and his later rhetorics, published, respectively, in 1892, in 1895, and in 1902, furnish striking illustrations of his own enforced variation of opinion within a period of less than twenty-five years. These variations of opinion, it is true, may be attributed not so much to changes that have actually taken place since